

The Role of Women in Preservation

A Georgia Perspective

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Georgia's State Historic Preservation Office, is grappling with many questions relating to the preservation of historic places associated with women.

- Is there a need for emphasizing the preservation of historic places associated with women?
- What is a women-related historic place?
- What is the best way to begin a preservation effort involving women's history?

Is There a Need?

Although women are half of the population, not much is known about historic places associated with them or about women's roles in commonly studied historic places such as residential, commercial, industrial, and community landmark buildings. Of the more than 1,500 National Register listings comprising over 38,000 historic properties in Georgia, less than 3% are listed **because** of their association with women. Similarly, of 1,965 Georgia historical markers, less than 70 relate to women. Many of these markers are based on legend or myth or mention a female only because of her husband. The other 1,400-plus listings or 1,900 historical markers may be related to women, but the role of women in these places has not been identified, evaluated, or even understood. Essentially, we as historians, architec-

tural historians, preservationists, and planners have been short-changing history and our historic environment by not taking a comprehensive view that fully includes women in evaluating and interpreting our historic places.

What is a Woman-Related Historic Place?

Although the need for studying women-related historic places is apparent, the task is daunting. There are many issues which need to be addressed, including simply defining a women-related historic place. Such a place is defined as **a historic place significant for its association with a particular woman or the activities of women.** Although this definition sounds straightforward, it brings up more questions related to how important the association with women must be before a historic place can be considered significant in the area of women's history.

Obvious examples of historic places with a direct association with women's history in Georgia are the Rockmart Woman's Club building, the Athens YWCA, designs of architect Lelia Ross Wilburn, or the buildings and sites associated with Juliette Gordon Lowe, the founder of the American Girl Scouts. These places are undoubtedly significant in terms of women's history in Georgia. There are other places with less direct associations whose connections to women tend to be more tenuous and less understood. Places with indirect associations with women include industrial complexes (such as the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills in Atlanta) which may have employed women; education-related buildings, such as schools where the teachers were often women, or houses with kitchens and garden spaces commonly associated with women.

If there is a clear differentiation between direct and indirect associations, then should efforts be devoted to re-interpreting already-known historic places to include the roles of women or should efforts focus on identifying places whose significance is more directly associated with women? These questions further confirmed the Historic Preservation Division's belief that a special initiative was needed to understand women's roles in Georgia's historic environment.

The Block Candy Company, Atlanta, Georgia, with its large number of women workers, symbolized the growing employment opportunities for women outside the home during the late-19th and early-20th century. Because of this association, should the Block Candy Company building have been listed in the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in women's history? Photo by Jim Lockhart, Georgia Historic Preservation Division.



Where to Begin?

In 1995, HPD recognized the lack in the understanding of women's roles in historic places. With the leadership of Beth Gibson, AIA, rehabilitation architect, and this author, the National Register Coordinator, HPD began a Women's History Initiative to address the topic of women's history in the identification, documentation, evaluation, and preservation of historic places.

The first major project of the initiative was a regional conference on women's history and historic preservation. Held in March 1996, "Telling Her Story: Expanding the Past of Georgia's Women Through Historic Places" brought together 12 scholars and over 100 people from a wide variety of backgrounds. The three main sessions were case studies of particular women in Georgia and their associated places, the identification of new landmarks in women's history, and cross-cultural perspectives of women and historic places.

Feedback from the closing discussion and the conference evaluation forms revealed a desire among the participants for projects focusing on women and their associated historic places. A majority of the responses centered on the need for greater activity in and awareness of preserving women-related places. For example, one conference participant pointed out that women's history is not a historical theme in the Georgia Historic Resources Survey (the state's ongoing, survey program of historic resources). Furthermore, women's history is not included in the National Register of Historic Places "areas of significance," although it can be added in the category of "Other." This again underscores the fact that gender is not routinely considered in the evaluation of historic places.

To help meet the needs identified by the conference participants and to further Georgia's understanding of places associated with woman, HPD is developing a historic context on historic places associated with women in Georgia. Catherine Lewis, a University of Iowa doctoral candidate, working with this author, is seeking funding for researching, writing, and publishing the historic context. This study will include six chapters and appendices.

The first chapter will provide a general overview of women's history in Georgia as it relates to historic places. The second chapter will define what constitutes a historic place significant for women's history. This chapter will include a discussion of the differences between the direct and indirect historical associations with women and try to resolve some of the issues concerning significance mentioned earlier.

The third chapter will describe and provide photographic examples of different kinds of places

associated with women. These places will be divided into categories including residential, environmental, religious, cultural, industrial, educational, and institutional. Chapter 4 will discuss resources available to researchers interested in women's history in Georgia. Catherine Lewis has completed the first bibliography of primary source material on Georgia women to be included in Appendix B.

Evaluation techniques and preservation strategies for places associated with women will be included in Chapters 4 and 5. The appendices will include a list of National Register listed properties in Georgia associated with women, the bibliography, and a directory of public and private agencies and organizations familiar with the preservation of women's places.

The mission of the Georgia's Women's History Initiative and the historic context is to integrate women's history and the preservation of historic places associated with women into the state's existing programs which record, document, interpret, and preserve historic places representing Georgia history. This mission will be accomplished by:

- actively seeking to identify and document historic places associated with women in Georgia—including specific places associated with a particular woman or event, as well as resources that collectively reflect broad themes associated with the roles of women in the state's history;
- reinterpreting historic places already identified in Georgia based upon a better understanding of women's history in Georgia; and
- promoting the awareness, appreciation, and preservation of historic places associated with women in Georgia through publications, heritage education programs, and tour guides that will increase public awareness.

The Women's History Initiative in Georgia is in its infancy. Its first steps may serve as a model for other states as the awareness of women's history and its relationship to historic preservation is more appreciated.

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